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Guanajuato

A City of Dreams

ONE OF GUANJUATO'S WIDE STREETS

Photo by Cox

A City of Dreams

(Guanajuato)

BY

MRS. PETER M. MYERS

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A City of Dreams

"AFTER a sleep of a hundred years, Guanajuato is waking up," an American resident of Mexico City said to me one day, and I tried to think what the old place would be like "waked up". Guanajuato—away up in the mountains, sleeping on the hillsides, the most dreamily picturesque city on all the North American continent—waking up! It was like hearing ill tidings of a friend, for the waking up process does not help quaint old Mexican cities, at least not for the idler or artist, or even for the every day tourista. On a former visit there were threatening signs of commercialism, and knowing what American capital and hustle and bustle can do for one of these drowsy places, I hurried away to Guanajuato, as one friend might fly to another in distress.

It is a full day's ride from Mexico City, and all the way we watched for some sign of the awakening, for we reasoned that if Guanajuato had waked up, some of the nearer places on the line of the railway must have shared in the catastrophe. At Tula, where the winds on a summer day are like so many breaths from heaven, the same women and children brought the same peppery things to eat, and the same little girls hurried to the car windows with brown jugs of pulque. Up through the beautiful valley of San Juan del Rio all was the same; the same people sold the same wares, and the same blind beggars held up the same dirty sombreros. At Querétaro, old, historic, quaint and beautiful—the place where Maximilian was put to death—the same women tended their garlanded jars of

food and coffee, and no awakening appeared. Indeed, all through the valley there were the same dear old sights, even to the primitive way of drawing water for irrigation—a bucket let down on the end of a log swung on a post—and the men who drew the water wore no more clothes than they ever did, their costume being a pair of white linen trousers rolled high above the knees, their rich copper-colored skins showing splendidly against the shining green of the trees above them. Much of the way was lined with exquisite gardens, out of which splashes of color and waves of delicious fragrance floated up to the travelers. Finally we reached Silao, where one must change cars for the little railroad which twists its way up through the hills toward Guanajuato; but we decided that if we were to witness the spectacle of the old city waked up, it should be by light of day, and for one night more we would dream of it as we knew it first. We found quarters in an old candle-lighted Mexican hotel, and from one of its balconies watched the new moon slide down out of the sky and the stars come out. The fragrance of a night-blooming honey-suckle floated up from some old patio, and over all the great plain and the blue hills was a wondrous golden light and exquisite silence. Surely there was no awakening here.

Early the next morning we started for Marfil, the sleepy little half-Moorish village which guards the entrance to the barranca where Guanajuato is hidden away. From Marfil into the city, some six miles further on and about a thousand feet higher up, the way is by tiny street cars, drawn by four mules. We feared electricity might have replaced these little tram-cars, and that we would go whizzing up the hill, and then we should know that the awakening had really come, for what city could sleep with those whir-

ring, bing-banging creatures flying through its streets? But it was all delightfully as it used to be—with perhaps a little closer packing in the cars of people and luggage—and then we started up the winding climb, along the muddy stream, past old gray walls, galloping and curving from one narrow street into another, the drivers alternately blowing their tin horns and whipping the mules, whose hides had long since become calloused and indifferent to all lashings.

Because it is so hidden away in the hills, few travelers into Mexico realize the proximity of Guanajuato, or that it is a city of sixty thousand people, and was once one of the most famous mining camps of the world. It is historic, too, and so old that its history can hardly be traced, though there are many stories and traditions in regard to its origin. Certainly its reason for beginning was in the rich ores stored away in the surrounding mountains. Comparatively few tourists find their way here, as it is twenty miles from the main line of railway, but the heart of the traveler must be dead indeed if it fails to be rejoiced by a few days in this charmingly queer old place. It is built in a barranca—one of many in a labyrinth of mountains—and as the city grew it had of necessity to climb the steep hills, and economise in room even to inches, compelling narrowest streets and flat roofs. Of course there is much of Spain about it, and somewhat of Italy too, but it resembles a Syrian city more than any other, and world-wide travelers say that certain parts of Guanajuato might be almost reproductions of Bethlehem, while others might be Jerusalem itself. The houses are of mud bricks, many of them not even plastered over, and the washing of many rains has given them a look of crumbling age which might carry them back to the time when the bright shining of a star

TEATRO JUAREZ

Photo by Cox

guided wise men to a Bethlehem manger. There is a distinct flavor of the Orient about it all, and if camels and turbaned riders should come into the picture it would not seem over-strange. As in the far East, the flat roofs serve far beyond shelter; they are the yard, the veranda, the balcony, the mirador, the place of retreat and the meeting place of friends. Its winding little thoroughfares can hardly be called streets, except in the business part; they are mostly narrow paths, and in a few places it is possible even to reach across and touch the opposite wall. These little streets meander aimlessly up the mountains, playing hide and seek with one another and giving at every turn the most exquisite bits for the brush of an artist. There is no such thing as walking on a level in Guanajuato. It is up or down, usually in a most decided manner, and crossing from one street to another is often by a stairway of cobble stones. The houses cling to the rocks, and overhang the ledges, and the zigzagging little by-ways lead from one delight to another. Cameras may not catch these pictures, and as yet no artist has been able to faithfully reproduce them. The one who can do so will make himself forever dear to all lovers of art.

One's pen may run riot with adjectives and enthusiasm, and yet give no real pictures of Guanajuato, so illusive are they; but if the idler will climb to the top of some of these high hills, where he may look down on the flat roofs rambling up the mountain to him, and across to the other side, where one terrace of roofs rises on another, a high wall, an old arch, a quaint stairway, leading to yet other roofs and walls and arches—he may get some faint idea of the city's quaintness. And if this journey is made at the close of day, in time to see the shadows gather, as the sun drops behind the mountains, touching their tops

with a golden mist, that scene will go with him in all after journeyings. Looking up at these peaks it seems as if, from the tops of some of them, one might almost behold the kingdoms of the earth spread out below; but the highest ones only reveal more mountain peaks, until it looks as if all the world had resolved itself into massive brown hills and intervening little valleys.

All the streets present a solid walled front, and it is only through an open door that one may even guess what is behind them. Sometimes the open door-way discloses only a hole in the wall, or an array of filth, and a lot of domestic animals —chickens, pigs, turkeys and dogs—all living in the same room with the family in great content; but more often, in Guanajuato at least, the doors reveal neat homes, and sometimes old patios beautiful with flowers and plants and singing birds. Indeed, in many of these homes, even of the very poor, we found exquisite cleanliness, the old stone floors scrubbed to shining, and everything in order with true Mexican rigidity.

Tucked away in the little streets and corners are the stands of all sorts of vendors—fruits, vegetables, zarapes, pottery, baskets, with junk shops and the "Thieves' Market" all so mingled together that it is not easy to tell where one begins or the other leaves off. On Sundays, their great market day, the place is filled with busy people, and all the life and color which go with a market day in Mexico, except that here, because of such limited space, the vendors spread out into the streets in every direction, like the tendrils of a vine—their wares displayed on the cobble-stone pavement—and every little by-way also becomes aflame with color.

Our hotel faced on what seemed to be an alley, but was really one of the widest streets. It promised at the corner of the block some eighteen

A NARROW WINDING STREET

Photo by Cox

feet in width, but narrowed down to nine, widened again to about sixteen, and compassed at least three distinct juts and bulges before it finally went quavering to the entrance a hundred feet away. The hotel itself has many architectural puzzles and wonders, and where the rooms are stored away, and how to find them, are problems which each guest must solve for himself. It was several days before I could understand how, having climbed but one flight of stone steps, my own little balcony overlooked an almost dizzy height above the street. But having learned the way in, and practiced a little on getting out, the traveler is well content with its many comforts, especially when one realizes that in passing in or out the way is under an old arch with an ancient inscription showing that the building was blessed and dedicated for use in 1557.

It was in the inner courts and patio of this good resting place that we discovered the first signs of the awakening of Guanajuato. Here was a continual hum of English-speaking voices, and the beginning and end of all conversation was of mines and mining. The very atmosphere was surcharged with gold and silver, and whether in the office, or dining-room, or patio, one heard of dividends, reports, assays, reduction processes, percentages, and the like. English-speaking people hurried in and hurried out, saddled horses clattered up to the old arched entrance, with men from the mines, and clattered away again, taking men out to the mines. Every now and then the little tram-car brought more people up from Marfil, and deposited them down in the little street below; the hum of English increased, and more people flitted in and flitted out in a very busy manner.

It was plainly no place for an idler, and I wandered out to mix with the more easy-going

A BUSY CORNER IN THE OLD MARKET

Photo by Cox

natives and renew my memories. On a former visit there promised a pretty romance, from one of the old balconies facing on the zocalo, and I tip-toed over there to see whether it might not still be going on; but no romance was there, nor could searching find out how it had fared. From one opening on the balcony a typewriter clicked continuously, and from another a phonograph sent out its hideous noises. On the further corner of the little park I encountered a whirlwind of American voices and activity, and a spirited air pervaded everything. Even the blind beggars had acquired a quicker walk and a more insistent, business-like manner.

Across the street, on the steps of the Teatro Juarez, were a lot of natives, seemingly the same ones who sat there years ago—their rain-bow hued zarapes, blue rebosos and big sombreros making a bright picture, and mingling a touch of the old world with the newness of this splendidly modern building. This theatre is one of the most beautiful in the world, and there are those who say it is the most beautiful. Although ground room in Guanajuato is so precious, this building stands on a lot by itself, one of the most valuable in the city, facing on the plaza, and its handsome entrance and massive stone steps are the first objects to attract the eye of the stranger. Its rows of columns across the front are Corinthian, but those in the interior are Aztec, while the decorations are Moorish. The draperies are soft and rich, and everything about the structure, inside and out, has an air and a grace which we Americans might do well to envy and imitate. The theatre was completed and stood unused for five years, waiting for President Diaz to open it. This was accomplished a few years ago, and the President bound himself by one more tie to the loyal people of this old camp.

A PICTURESQUE WATER CARRIER

Photo by Ravell

The streets used to be lighted with oil lanterns, as they should be; but now electric lights glitter everywhere, and have put out half the charm and shadowy mystery of the old cavern-like thoroughfares. In the lantern-lighted nights there was a great fascination in poking about the winding little ways under the guidance of an gendarme, or the protection of a friend con una pistola. The old lanterns still hang across the street, somewhat sullenly asserting their erstwhile usefulness, and defying the municipality to do without them, as their trustworthiness sometimes compensates for lack of brilliancy.

Here and there were traces of the great flood of 1905—especially down the ravine leading to Marfil, and one realizes a little what devastation was wrought in one short hour, for that was the duration of the flood, from the time the waters began to rise in the streets until they had reached a depth of fourteen feet in places and entirely subsided, carrying away scores of homes, killing some five hundred people, and sweeping away hundreds of burros, mules, and all sorts of domestic animals, like so many wisps of straw. The flood was caused by a water-spout, and before the people could realize what was happening, each little street and path had become a mountain torrent, pouring into the center of the city, and choking up the only outlet, the street of the tram-cars leading to Marfil.

By the time it was over, night had come, and nothing could be done except for those who still had homes to give food and shelter to those who had none; and the city went to bed, dazed, water-soaked and dreary; but before it had hardly wakened the next morning to know what it had suffered, some of the mine operators had marched their men in from the mines, and the work of helping the city to find itself was begun. Every-

TWO OF GUANAJUATO'S WATER CARRIERS

Photo by Cox

thing recent in Guanajuato dates from this great flood, and everywhere are marks showing how high the water rose. Even in the little church by the plaza, high up on one of the pillars by the altar, there is this inscription: "Inundacion, Julio, 1905". It was to this church we went to renew our acquaintance with friends of other days—particularly with a life-sized statue of St. Peter, and another of the cock which crew when Peter had denied his Master thrice. These two statues stand on the same pedestal, as if in life they had been the closest friends, and we were glad to find that the Inundacion had not washed away or in anywise harmed these two delightful bits of realism.

There have been other floods in Guanajuato—indeed her history is well sprinkled with them—and one in 1760 wrought great ruin and destroyed many lives, but none have ever equalled in any way that of 1905. A tunnel was begun, sometime in the eighteenth century, for the purpose of carrying off the waters which pour down into the city from the mountain passes in heavy rains; but it was abandoned for one cause and another. It is now being completed at a cost of a million dollars, and Guanajuato will no more be a prey to floods.

The city's water supply is furnished from two large reservoirs. One beyond the church of Valenciana, high up in the mountains, supplies the houses and fountains. This is strictly guarded, none of the hills about it are allowed to be used for pasture, and every precaution is taken to keep the water pure. The dam across this reservoir is a massive, artistic piece of masonry, the top forming a splendid road-way to the hills and country beyond. It was here that the fiesta of St. John's day used to be observed. On that day, the 24th of June, everybody in Mex-

ico is supposed to have a bath; the bath-houses are decorated, many of them have music, and are opened at four o'clock in the morning, and it is a long day of cleanliness and rejoicing—at least it was designed to be such! Guanajuato celebrated it by opening the flood-gates of this dam, and letting off the water from this reservoir, or lake. In those days the gates were of wood, and prisoners condemned to death were appointed to break them down. Of course it was a most dangerous undertaking, and very few escaped with their lives, but those who did obtained their liberty.

And so it came about that the place was called "La Presa de Esperanza"—the dam of hope. It was a slender hope at best which was held out to condemned men; but life was dear, even to them, and they battled madly with the waters for life and liberty. The natives came from miles away for this fiesta, and great crowds thronged the banks to witness the sport, which ranked with bull-fighting and other amusements of the kind—to all which the blood of both their Aztec and Spanish ancestors had given them a leaning and a liking. Rare sport indeed it must have been, and a gruesomely realistic way of commemorating the birth-day of St. John the Baptist.

The other reservoir is at the further end of the city, and is made to beautify that section. "La Presa" they call it, and it is a graceful combination of curves, arches, stone steps, little lakes, high walls, terraces, flowers and fountains and little shadowy pathways. It is a delightful spot in which to while away the hours, and with the sun shifting through the leaves, and bird-songs overhead, one may watch the streams of color flowing down the forky mountain paths at six o'clock—the peons coming from their work in the

mines, and each one wearing or carrying a brilliant zarape and the ever picturesque sombrero.

Hidalgo was a native of Guanajuato, and in the beautiful little park at La Presa is a splendid bronze statue of him—the George Washington of Mexico. He lived in San Filipe from 1792 to 1798, and a tablet there tells the story of this beloved patriot, who was put to death in Chihuahua in 1811, and his head brought to Guanajuato, and hung on a corner of the Alhondiga de Graniditas, the hideous spike still remaining on the historic old building. If Hidalgo could have known how, in after years, he would be revered and honored, perhaps he would have counted it full compensation for losing his life; or perhaps he did not care if he did lose it in struggling to help the people he had all his life loved and tried to help. And if he can look back now it must be an infinite satisfaction to know how much he did accomplish for their good.

The water-carriers of Guanajuato add much to the city's quaintness. Many of them are women and young girls, who carry the large earthen jars on their heads or shoulders in a most graceful, oriental fashion, and as they gather about some old fountain, make delightful pictures. At La Presa three of these bare-footed, picturesque carriers used to come every evening to fill their jars, usually laughing as they came and went. I longed to perpetuate them with a camera, but they were just too late for the light, and all I caught was a cheerful "buenas tardes," and a smile—though in my memory I shall always have the picture of these three women and their gracefully poised jars silhouetted against the evening sky, as they single-filed across the old stone terrace.

The Panteon is one of the most interesting of its kind in Mexico. It stands well up on the mountain, and no one may pass through the

OLD CHURCH BY THE PLAZA

Photo by Cox

ALHONDIQA DE GRANIDITAS

Photo by Cox

entrance except by permission of the guard. All around the interior, to the top of the wall, are little places allotted for interment. They are exactly like the pigeon-holes of a desk, but large enough for a casket. A certain sum is charged for perpetual right to one of these spaces, and if at the end of a specified time this sum is not paid, the casket is taken out, the contents put in a corridor below—to swell the half mile of human bones already there—and the space rented to some one else. It happens sometimes, in this casting out process, that the remains are found to be well preserved, in which case they are placed in another corridor, and made to stand along with others of their kind, gathered in this under-ground place without regard to affinities or former friendships or enmities. One old fellow looks as if he had died of laughing; others appear to appreciate the grim humor of the situation, while some of them will never cease to look their resentment. One's memories of Guanajuato will be quite as pleasant without a visit to this gruesome collection, but if the idler is also a conscientious sightseer, a climb down this winding, narrow stairway will be necessary; and the silent people down there are not quite so repulsive since they have been clothed with white surplices.

The only wagons in the city are huge and high two-wheeled carts, drawn by six mules, hitched four abreast and two abreast, and they make a great clatter over the cobble-stone pavements. Of course these carts can only get through the widest streets, so the problem of carrying heavy loads of all sorts falls on the patient little burro—always the burden bearer and philosopher, and part and parcel of the industry and welfare of Mexico. There are a few fine equipages in the city, but the best way of getting about is on horse-

CALLE DEL CAMPANERO

back; indeed the full joy of a stay in Guanajuato is made perfect by riding over the mountains and through the little valleys on one of these sure-footed horses, many of whom still retain the pride and grace and fine features of their Arabian ancestors.

The city's name is an old Indian one, and used to be spelled "Quashiquato", and "Quanashuato", and other ways, and finally evolved into Guanajuato, and is said to mean "Mountain of Frogs", and to derive its name from a frog-shaped stone found there, which the Indians worshipped. Be that as it may, the Spaniards began coming here in 1547, attracted by the reports of the rich mines, which had hitherto been worked by the Chichimeca or Otomi Indians—branches of the Aztecs —and it was not long before this came to be the scene of some of the greatest mining activities the world had ever known. And there are those in Guanajuato who tell you that what that age was there, in magnificence and splendor, we of our time can form no idea, and that our modern bonanzas are mere nothings in comparison to the riches taken from those mines then. The rich and cultivated and the nobility came over from Spain, as did also the adventurers. And as the mines more and more poured out their wealth, the necessities and luxuries of the people increased, until it required the markets of the world to supply their wants. And so it came about that there were brought there the richest and finest silks from Japan, the rarest and most beautiful china which could be procured in any country, Arabian horses, and even carved ivory furniture from India—indeed every luxury which could be thither transported eventually found its way into this camp of fabulous wealth. At that time Spain derived the greater part of her wealth from Mexico, and especially from Guanajuato,

one mine alone paying $17,000,000 in royalties to the Crown of Spain.

The work in all these mines was done by the peons, who received six cents a day, when they were paid anything. It was not for them that the mines poured out their gold and silver. But these poor people were very religious—perhaps it was more comfortable for a person if he was very religious in those days, for he was then under the dominion of Spain—and when they were not earning the fabulous sum of six cents a day in the mines, they could build churches without pay, and give thanks for the privilege! The church of Valenciana was built in this way. It is near the Valenciana mine, away up on the mountain, and commands a superb view of the city. If built in the ordinary way this church would probably not have cost more than $150,000, with perhaps $250,000 more for its gold and silver candlesticks and gold-leaf ornamentations; but in that golden age they were not careful of the cost in building a church, and for this one they sent to Spain and procured the costliest and rarest wines with which to mix the mortar—thus bringing the cost up to more than a million of dollars. The Count of Valenciana would have his people worship well! The excavations for this church were carried out in purple and scarlet silk bags, blessed and consecrated for that special purpose. The church of Valenciana was built by the operatives of the one mine, which has produced some three hundred millions of dollars. It has been worked down twenty-two hundred feet, and has fifty-eight miles of underground workings, and at present contains about one million cubic meters of water.

In that glorious golden dream Guanajuato lived for years, and every year the dream became more beautiful, more vivid and more real. Here

was really inexhaustible wealth, limitless possibilities! With these great hills filled almost to bursting with gold and silver, what mind could compass the future of Guanajuato? The mountains were alive with peons and burros, carrying the ores, hurrying with all the speed possible to a Mexican and a burro; but do their best, they could not get the ores out fast enough; men and burros would be exhausted before the bottom of the mines could be reached. It was good just to be alive in those days—at least for those who owned the mines—to find one's treasure piling higher each day, to know that the future held only gold and untold luxuries—no want nor wish that could not be gratified, if only the markets of the world held out! How more than golden was the dream!

But finally a distant rumble was heard. This mine had not produced quite so much of late; that one had come upon a poor vein; another had had some misfortunes, and yet others were filling with water. Things were not going well; and at last the precious ores seemed to give out. The mines had been worked as deep and as well as they could be, with the primitive methods of those days, and there came a time when they could go no further. On by one the mines ceased to be worked at all, and the rich people—those who had not spent all their wealth as fast as they got it—invested their money in the fertile lands between Leon and Querétaro; those who could get away moved to other places; and Guanajuato went to sleep! Seemingly hers was a dreamless sleep, which should know no waking. If she dreamed, it was a nightmare; if she waked it was to poverty and dreariness. The hills which had been so packed with riches were now great masses of profitless, ungiving rock, which would not raise

A CORNER NEAR THE MARKET

Illus. by Ravell

corn, and without corn the people could not live. How more than wretched was the prospect!

A few years ago new mines were discovered hereabouts, and Americans and other foreigners began coming in. They brought with them not only capital, but new methods of working the old mines, new and modern machinery, and new ways of economising, so that even what was considered waste material in old dumps was made valuable. Investors now and then paid what seemed enormous prices for apparently exhausted mines—and which were exhausted so far as Mexican ways of working them were concerned. The cyanide process of reducing the ores was brought here, and the patio process almost done away with, so that only one of those old patios is in operation in Guanajuato, and that will not long continue. This process, although most picturesque, can well be spared, because so costly in the lives of men and mules.

At last, through a persevering American, electric power was brought to Guanajuato from a hundred miles away! And this same man of faith built a cyanide plant, and demonstrated its efficiency, and all in so short a time that those who doubted and jeered were amazed, and a new era was launched for the old mining camp. Again the mountains are alive with peons and burros, hurrying the ores from the mines; again the mountains are filled almost to bursting with gold and silver—so the dream runs—and again the treasure is piling higher day by day! Here and there on the side of a hill, or down among the little mud houses may be found a big, busy mill, where hundreds of men work day and night, and the wheels turn unceasingly.

And if the idler has a well tuned ear he may

discern, above the noise and rumble, a melodious rythm, as

"All day long the stamp mill
Rolls its thunder down the glen
In toil to free the yellow gold
That binds the souls of men."

These new methods and economies have tremendously increased the profit on all the ores, and now it is estimated that the yearly production amounts to something more than twelve million dollars, with profits to exceed five millions of dollars, and ever increasing prospects and capacity—so that now the possibilities of this famous camp are once more bewildering and bewitching. Indeed it is said that the proposed improvements and new mines being developed, will bring the production up to about $25,000,000 annually—of which the fortunate stockholders will receive something like $10,000,000 a year in dividends. Of course there hovers over the place an air of subdued excitement, an expectant waiting, and there is always present the charm of the speculative element, which here is peculiarly fascinating because of the rich discoveries which have been made and are likely to be made, all through these ore-packed mountains.

And thus it is through the finding of new mines, and the discovery and introduction of new processes, and American capital and machinery being put into old mines which were supposed to be exhausted, and American energy behind it all, that Guanajuato is renewing her golden dream—or perhaps waking up, as my American friend said—but fortunately she cannot all wake up, at least not all at a time; and there are yet, and always will be, many sleepy, picturesque places in the old city, where the idler may dream almost any dream he chooses. If it is of gold, and he

PANORAMA OF GUANAJUARTO AND CACTUS-CROWNED HILL TOPS

Photo by Cox

will take a pick and a divining rod, and go out into the hills, that dream may come to pass surprisingly soon. If his dream is of old china, rare antiques and zarapes, and he will wander out into queer places, and idle away a few hours with the natives, he may find such exquisite treasures as to make him dread the waking, lest his dream should not prove true. Or does he dream that brighter days are in store even for these much despised peons? That foreigners coming into Mexico will teach them a better way of living—without necessarily changing their religion or their picturesque costumes—and that they will eventually learn to keep clean, and make their land and their labor bring them a better material welfare? It is said that a higher civilization is beginning to press in upon these quiet brown people, all over Mexico, and this dream also may come to pass. And if the idler will lift his eyes above the little streets, above the terraces of flat roofs, and walls and arches, above the mines, and church towers, he may see—or dream that he sees—the Millenium coming over those cactus-crowned hill-tops, almost any day. But whatever the idler may dream, Guanajuato dreams again of gold!